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ABSTRACT

The Rural Extension Centre at the University of Queensland (Australia) Gatton College provides accredited education and training for practicing rural extension professionals, from certificate to masters level, through a workplace-based program of adult learning projects and workshops. Action learning and the application of adult learning principles are used to successfully deliver the courses, according to two evaluations recently completed. Adult learning philosophy indicates that adults are self-directed to learn what is relevant to them and their needs. Participants are encouraged to use adult learning principles as a conscious learning method that they can model in their professional roles as teachers of adult farmers and rural community members. Action learning is applied in course design in three main phases: (1) as a micro-process during the sessions of the first residential for each subject; (2) as a macro-process during the workplace learning project; and (3) as a mega-process throughout the course. Evaluations have shown that respondents not only recognize the adult learning and action learning basis of the courses, but also have found these aspects the most useful in applying their learning in the workplace. The learning project is singled out as the way in which theory is applied in the workplace. The adult learning model used in these courses has a wider application in many other learning situations. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/TD)

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Workplace Learning and Accredited Training - Benefits to Individuals and their Clients

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The Rural Extension Centre provides accredited education and training from Certificate to Masters level through a workplace based program of learning projects and workshops.

Action learning and the application of adult learning principles are being used to successfully deliver the courses according to two evaluations recently completed. These courses are conducted by the Rural Extension Centre (REC) through the University of Queensland (UQ) at Gatton College.

Action learning is applied in the design of the course in three main phases:

1. as a micro-process, during the sessions of the first residential for each subject
2. as a macro-process, during the work place learning project, and
3. as a mega-process, the first residential, work place learning project, second review and feed back residential and in the final written report.

The evaluation has shown that respondents not only recognise the adult learning and action learning basis of the courses, but also have found these aspects the most useful to help them apply their learning in the workplace. The learning project is singled out as the way in which the theory of the subjects is used in the work place. The learning model used in the courses conducted by the REC has a wider application into many other learning situations, from field days to action research PhD programs.

Introduction

1. The Rural Extension Centre

The Rural Extension Centre (REC) is a joint initiative between the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI) and The University of Queensland. Its headquarters are at UQ Gatton. The REC's vision is *"enriching rural communities through learning partnerships"* and the mission is *"to create, foster and implement collaborative action and learning opportunities through extension training, research, information, education and development for rural well-being and beauty"*.

One of the primary tasks for the REC is to provide a focus for training in extension skills for practicing extension professionals, through the following accredited training programs:

- The ***Certificate in Extension*** - accredited by Gatton College;
- The ***Graduate Certificate in Rural Systems management (Rural Extension)*** *and the Post* ***graduate Diploma in Rural Systems Management (Rural Extension),*** and
- The ***Masters of Rural Systems Management Studies (Rural Extension).***

These are offered through the School of Natural Rural Systems Management in the Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science, UQ.

The REC brings to these courses the experience of specialist extension staff through its partnership with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI) and knowledge gained through further study in extension and education.

2. The philosophy behind the courses: their structure and design

The education and training philosophy of the courses is that of Adult Learning (Knowles 1984) where adults are self-directed to learn what is relevant to them, their needs or their work situation. The objective is to encourage participants to use this as a conscious learning method which they can model in their professional role in their workplace.

The structure and design of the courses, with the workshop residential sessions and workplace learning projects, meet the needs of full-time professional staff and their organisations while delivering a direct and immediate input into the workplace. In order to deliver education and training in a manner

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that meets these adult needs, the REC has based all courses and subjects on the Action Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984, Revans 1982) and Adult Learning Principles (Knowles 1990).

The action learning cycle drives the training at both the micro, macro and mega levels.

Learning theories for training and extension

1. General learning theories in application

Burns (1994) outlines four pathways for adult education and training:

- educational institutions which teach adults alongside younger students
- educational institutions set up primarily for adults
- non-educational organisations that teach adults as a by-product of their own main activity
- independent adult learning conducted by individuals interested in particular topics using resources to hand. (Burns 1994 p 227-228).

The REC is an organisation that covers the last three groups and it is set up to help adults learn in a work related context. It also hopes to do so in an independent adult learning manner, where the participants are encouraged to use a whole range of resources to learn and for this learning to be accredited at university level.

The course stems from an androgogical approach where this is defined as "the science of teaching adults" (Knowles 1990). Malouf (1994) has converted this into a set of guidelines for teaching adults in "a fun and exciting way". Fell (1996) bases his 7 learning principles on these approaches and that of Rogers (1973)

In the field of agriculture extension, professionals work with people. Whatever aims governments have or regional administrations or even within workplaces, extension professionals deal with people. These people are almost always adults, with varied levels of education, from high school through to Postgraduate degrees.

Many of the clients in extension are farmers, again with varied levels of education and experience. Many are characterised as being conservative, approaching change cautiously. This is often true for extensionists and researchers as well.

The application of the principles of adult learning and action learning to extension should improve the ways in which services are delivered to clients. The REC has developed training courses based on these principles and are helping extensionists put these into practice with their farmer clients. However, the principles are more widely applicable, in all facets of work, including research and regulation.

2. Principles of adult learning in workplace learning

The adult learning principles have been used to plan the course and are intrinsic to its delivery.

Seven principles are grouped below (Fell 1986 & 1996).

Principle one: Build on local experience, use the knowledge within the group/individual.

Adults come to educational or training activities for a variety of reasons. What they bring with them is a wealth of experience that is there to be built on and used in the particular activity (Malouf 1993, Knowles 1990 and Rogers 1973). It is important to tap into this experience, to see what they already know and to then develop the material that you have from this base. Learning projects in the workplace are a direct way of putting new knowledge into practice that is based on the participants' experience.

Principle two: Make the learning environment comfortable and encouraging.

When adults are faced with a new (learning) experience they are often anxious about their own perceived deficiencies and about showing this in public (Rogers 1973). Any learning experience should be structured to take these feelings into account. It is important therefore to create an environment that is comfortable and drawing out their experience is one starting point. The residential sessions use good facilitation and other processes to ensure a good learning environment.

The learning environment must be socially and mentally safe (Malouf 1993). As participants develop their projects in the workplace they are operating in a familiar and comfortable environment, as well as being socially and mentally safe.

Principle three: Ensure that the learning activity meets the needs and relates to the problems of the client group.

An important aspect to remember in any learning activity is that adults feel a need to learn (Malouf 1993, Knowles 1990) and they usually have problems or issues that they are concerned about. Thus they come into activities looking for answers to their concerns. The learning needs to have practical pay off.

Learning projects are planned by the participants to meet their needs and thus have an immediate impact.

Principle four: **Involve the audience in planning their own learning experience.**

Involvement and participation in the learning process are also important for adults, activities need to be designed that cater for the four learning styles (Honey & Mumford 1986). The action learning process provides a basic framework for involving people and ensuring participation. Activity with reflection and then developing how that might be used in practice are the key elements.

Adults come to these learning experiences wanting to learn, so we must make it possible for them to do so. Activities should therefore challenge and stimulate the individual in the learning process.

Principle five: **Have activities that involve, that are stimulating and are participatory.**

Principle six: **Allow time for people to reflect on what they are learning, take difficult subjects slowly and always be open to questioning.**

Principle seven: **Build group and individual confidence by letting them know they are right, building a confidence that they are making progress towards their learning goals.**

There is inherent in these principles an assumption that we are here to help people to learn, not to "teach" them what they need to know. This does not mean that the use of a lecture or talk is never appropriate; it means that we should be careful to match the learning process with the audience needs and learning styles. These are the principles that each of the subjects is designed around and is the basis, with action learning, of the whole course. The course shows micro- , macro- and mega- action learning cycles. The learning project is an action learning activity.

3. Brief description of course format and requirements

The structure of each 10 credit point subject in the courses is :

1. A compulsory five day residential at the beginning of the subject which is designed to expose participants to theoretical concepts and the development of a plan for undertaking a learning project within their workplace;
2. **A work-based or community-based learning project** (undertaken as part of the partici pant's normal work) which is completed prior to returning for the second residential ses sion, usually within two months of the first residential;
3. **A compulsory two day residential,** 10 - 12 weeks from commencement of the subject which allows for review and peer feedback on the learning project before the final written report is submitted, and
4. **A final written report (learning project)** which is submitted 3-4 weeks after the second residential as the final part of each subject and the final part of the assessment.

The learning process of the REC course as a series of action learning cycles

1. Micro-process used during the residential sessions

Figure 1 illustrates the way the action learning process operates during the residential sessions. The activities that help ensure that the action learning cycle is put into practice are:

- Quick reflection or debrief at the end of each particular session.
- Learning Log, using the same prompt questions, is completed each day.
- Walk-talk, 10 minutes discussion with a partner at the end of each day.
- Learning review, to start each day there is a small group discussion, learning review, based on the action learning questions.

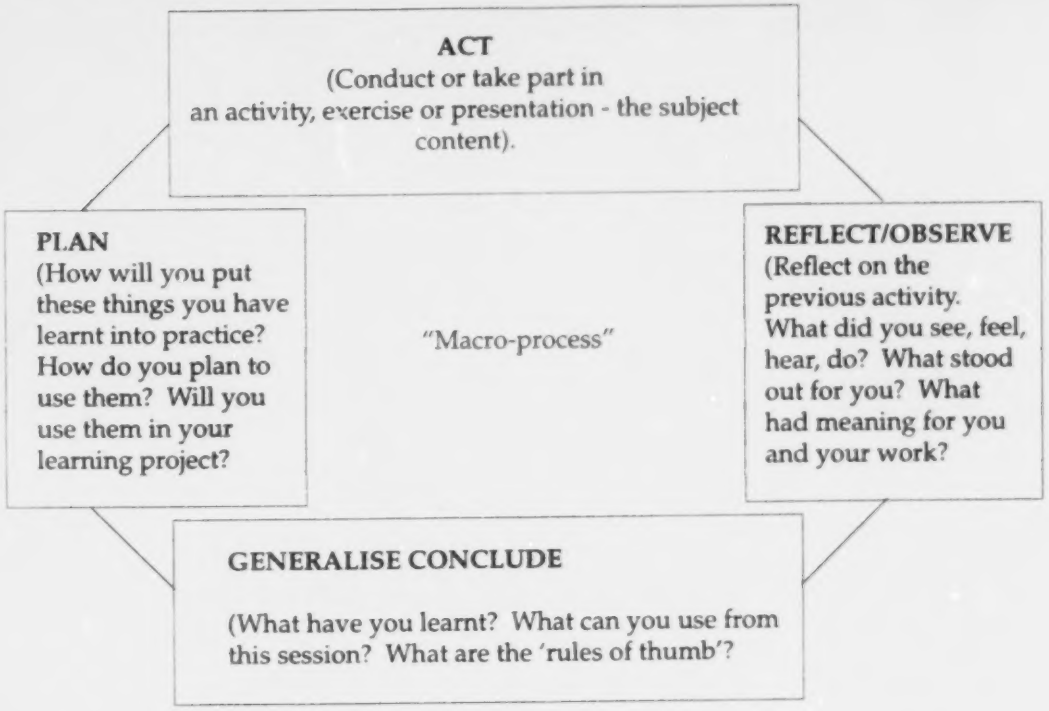
ACT
(Conduct or take part in an activity, exercise or presentation - the subject content).
PLAN
(How will you put these things you have learnt into practice? How do you plan to use them? Will you use them in your learning project?
"Macro-process"
REFLECT/OBSERVE
(Reflect on the previous activity. What did you see, feel, hear, do? What stood out for you? What had meaning for you and your work?
GENERALISE CONCLUDE
(What have you learnt? What can you use from this session? What are the 'rules of thumb'?

Figure 1. Micro-process for learning in the Extension Course

Each subject opens with a session on expectations and then a session that enables the participants to share their current level of knowledge (briefly) with each other and the trainers. These activities and the action learning process in 'action' also help to ensure that the subject is conducted with the principles of adult learning at the forefront.

Some subjects also use Action Learning Sets (McGill & Beaty 1992) or Learning Support Groups (LSG) during the first residential session. If participants have found them useful, they have continued to use these during the period of the learning project.

2. Macro-process for assisting with the learning projects

Action learning is used as each participant feels they need to in their own learning project and is usually used at intervals during the project. Many participants report back on their workplace based learning project in terms of:

What I planned to do,
What actually happened,
What I learnt from this and
What I will do differently in the future or for the rest of the project.

Figure 2 sets out the learning project within the action learning cycle.

The Learning Log is also used by some to help drive their learning project, it is set up with this in mind. Some people continue to use the learning support groups throughout the learning project phase of the subject.

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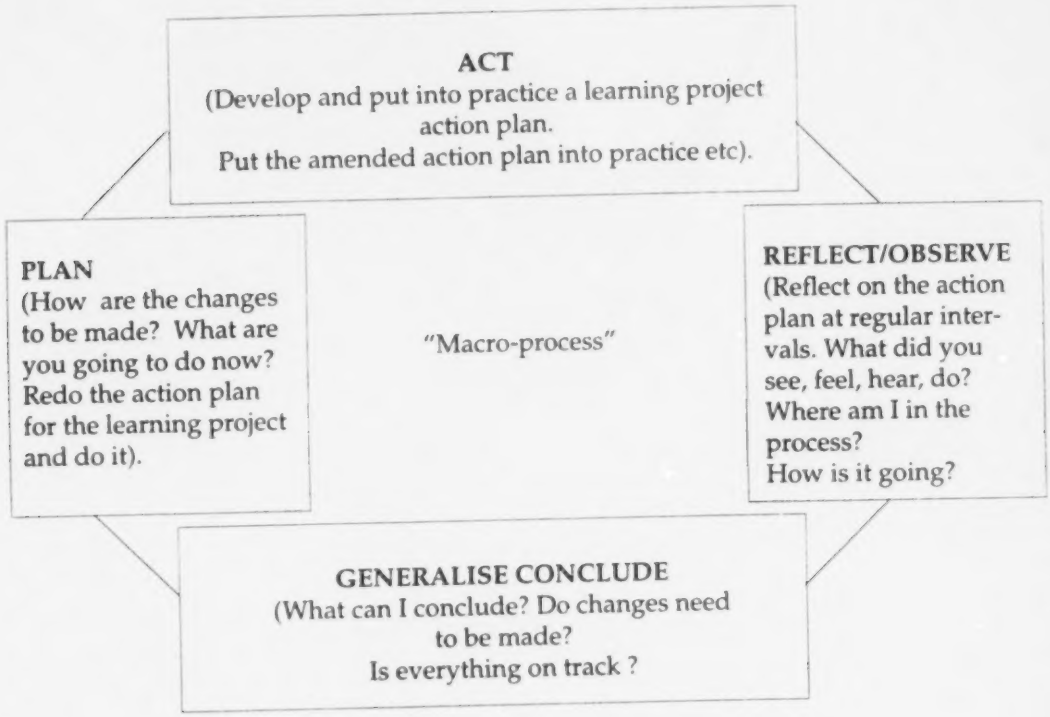
ACT
(Develop and put into practice a learning project action plan.
Put the amended action plan into practice etc).
PLAN
(How are the changes to be made? What are you going to do now? Redo the action plan for the learning project and do it).
"Macro-process"
REFLECT/OBSERVE
(Reflect on the action plan at regular intervals. What did you see, feel, hear, do? Where am I in the process?
How is it going?
GENERALISE CONCLUDE
(What can I conclude? Do changes need to be made?
Is everything on track ?

Figure 2. Macro-process for the learning project

3. Mega-process for learning

The flow chart below shows all the parts of the mega-process that the REC uses in the conduct of the subjects in the course and represents a mega-action learning process for the course. Each subject has the following elements:

- content and theory sessions that lead to a better understanding of the subject;
- developing an action plan to put aspects of the theory into practice (learning project);
- working through the action plan with reflection and review as they are going along;
- review and reflection on the learning project in the second residential session;
- generalisations and conclusions from the subject and learning project, the learning;
- re-plan or plan to use in the future, written into the report at the end of the subject.

The mega process of action learning is captured in Figure 3 below and shows the four phases that are broadly encompassed in the courses and for each subject in the course.

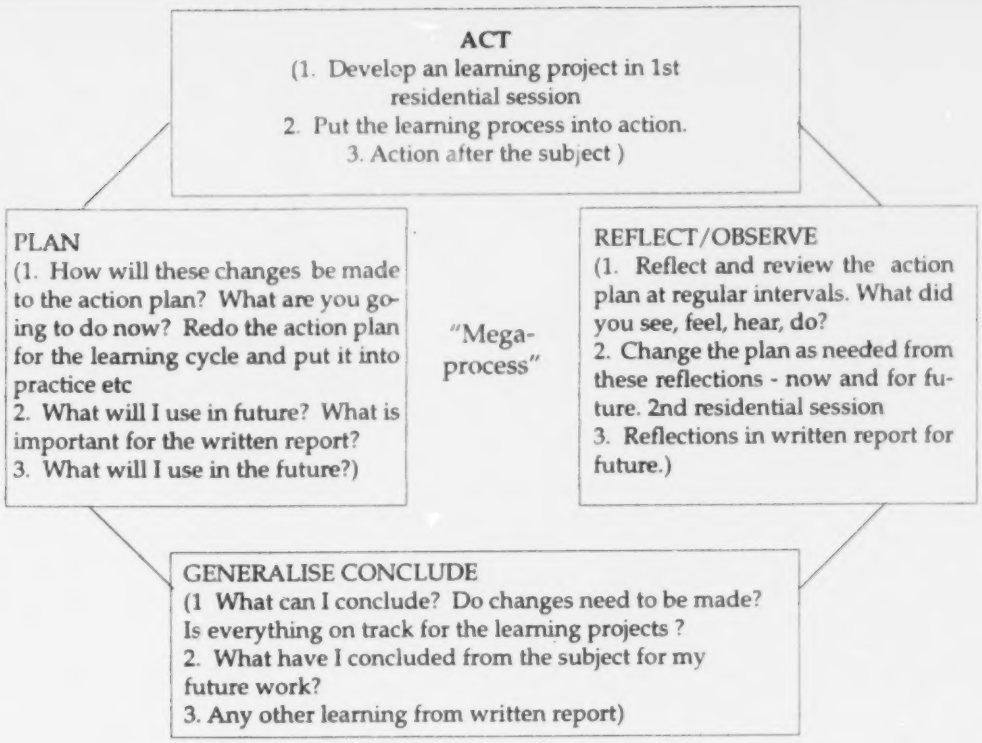
ACT
(1. Develop an learning project in 1st residential session
2. Put the learning process into action.
3. Action after the subject)
PLAN
(1. How will these changes be made to the action plan? What are you going to do now? Redo the action plan for the learning cycle and put it into practice etc
2. What will I use in future? What is important for the written report?
3. What will I use in the future?)
"Mega-process"
REFLECT/OBSERVE
(1. Reflect and review the action plan at regular intervals. What did you see, feel, hear, do?
2. Change the plan as needed from these reflections - now and for future. 2nd residential session
3. Reflections in written report for future.)
GENERALISE CONCLUDE
(1 What can I conclude? Do changes need to be made? Is everything on track for the learning projects ?
2. What have I concluded from the subject for my future work?
3. Any other learning from written report)

Figure 3. The mega-process used in the course

There is evidence from evaluations (Fell 1997 Hossain 1998) that participants have not only recognised the process being used, but have understood the principles and are putting them into practice in their work. Some of these findings are briefly described and the key recommendations from the evaluations are reported.

The application of adult learning and action learning in the workplace

In his examination of data from an in-depth interview of 14 participants who had completed the Certificate Course (Fell 1997) shows that all the respondents have deliberately used some aspects of adult learning, action learning, learning styles or other learning theory, especially in their learning projects.

The respondents report that they have used adult learning principles at work (12), action learning cycle in activities (10), learning styles and other learning theory (13).

These findings are corroborated by Hossain (1998)

1. Learning projects as vehicle for application of principles

Learning projects provide both the vehicle and the opportunity to put theory into practice - not just the adult learning principles and action learning, but also the material content of each subject. Thus they operate as an action learning opportunity within the action learning context of the course as a whole.

All respondents (Fell 1997) feel the learning projects are one of the keys to their successful completion of the course. The adult learning subject was, in particular, an opportunity which most were able to use to demonstrate an understanding of the principles of adult learning and application of these in their project. As well they used action learning to drive the process.

2. Managers and clients perceptions of the use of adult learning principles

Of the 13 managers canvassed, 3 have stated directly that their staff member has used part of the adult learning process/content in their work. In this instance they have used and understand learning styles. Internal clients have noticed the use and understanding of adult learning principles (4/8) and action learning(3/8) by their colleague in their interactions with them and other team members.

External clients have not recognised adult learning and action learning directly but have acknowledged facilitation and good communication in group work on the part of the extension staff (10/18).

Anticipating that it may be difficult for these principles to be articulated directly, an Adult Learning Principle index (ALP score) and an Action Learning Cycle index (ALC score) were developed and managers and clients were asked to rate an activity against 15 statements which made up this score.

	Managers	Internal clients	External clients
ALP index -average	4.14	4.38	4.23
ALP - range	3.32 - 4.80	3.36 - 4.54	3.18 - 5.0
ALC - average	3.65	3.84	4.08
ALC - range	2.50 - 4.40	2.0 - 5.0	2.60 - 5.0

Figure 4. Adult Learning Index scores and Action Learning Index scores

The ALP score and the ALC score indicate that while managers and clients might not recognise these principles directly, they are able to rate activities undertaken. Overall they have rated the group who have completed their Certificate very highly on both the ALP score and ALC score, thus it seems that the group generally are using Adult Learning Principles and Action Learning in their work. And the respondents themselves acknowledged the central part of the learning project in this application.

3. Use and understanding of Adult Learning and Action Learning

The underlying principles on which the whole of the course is designed are those of adult learning and action learning. Participants have used the adult learning principles and action learning in their work and have found these to be the most useful part of the course.

Nearly all of the group (13/14) demonstrated that they had a more than basic understanding of the underlying principles on which the course is built - those of adult learning and action learning and recognised that the course was developed with these in mind. In addition most felt the REC was putting these principles into practice, most of the time. Hossain (1998) from a larger group of respondents who had completed the course showed the same trends.

Almost all the group said they had learnt the principles of adult learning (11) and the action learning cycle (8), many quoting an increased knowledge of learning styles (8) as a learning and others mentioning aspects like co-learning or other learning theories and made references to, or descriptions of processes used (particularly in their learning projects) which were based in adult learning or action learning.

There were many direct references from the group to their use of action learning (9), both in their work and through the learning projects; to the use of adult learning principles and to the use of learning logs or diaries (3).

Summary

It is obvious that the group as a whole have a good understanding of adult learning and action learning and are putting these into practice in their daily work or through their learning projects at the very least. The importance of the learning project in the whole process is emphasised. This reinforces the use of adult learning, action learning and the learning project based in the workplace, as a good learning format for accredited training in extension.

The emphasis on adult learning and action learning should be kept in the course and the subject of Adult Learning in Extension should remain as a requisite subject. The use of adult learning principles, the action learning processes and the learning project as the basis for developing each subject is recommended as good practice for developing good learning experiences for other clients and activities.

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